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THE SPIRITUAL MESSAGE OF MALACHI.

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It has often been noted that the prophetic message of the book of Malachi is expressed in a form at once scholastic and formal. There is an orderliness and precision about its phrasing and its sequence of ideas which suggests the study rather than "the gates, at the entry of the city," or other places of concourse where prophets were wont to be. Perhaps, as Professor Smith suggests,¹ the way was no longer open for the prophet to appear in public to inspire his nation by spoken appeals, and in consequence his ideas received a setting less rhetorical and striking than in earlier days. However matter-of-fact the prophet may have been, he was, nevertheless, a skilful and spirited proclaimer of truths which were of fundamental importance to the community in which he lived, and of no little moment to those in every age who undervalue the divine factor in life or overrate the significance of a prosperity gained by shrewd rather than square dealing.

The prophecy deals with the pressing problems of the little community centering at Jerusalem. Like his great predecessors, the prophet—who veils his personality—discusses these, not as acts significant in themselves, but as modes of life and character to be judged in the light of their bearing on a true relationship to God. Viewed in themselves they were of little moment; as examples of an unwilling or slovenly rendering of service due to Jehovah, they became a means of evoking noble prophetic thoughts, both timely and of permanent value.

The importance of the problems at the time will be made clear by a brief survey of the current conditions. Without determining the exact date to which the prophecy of Malachi

¹ *Book of the Twelve Prophets*, ii, 345.

should be assigned, it is safe to assume that the state of affairs which it discloses could not have existed after the joint influence of Ezra and Nehemiah had brought about a well-considered and thoroughgoing reform. A probable date may be sought in the period just preceding their campaign. Many decades had elapsed since the completion and dedication of the second temple in 516 B. C., a period in which the vitality and vigor of the spiritual life of the Jerusalem community underwent a searching test.

All political ambitions, based upon the undefined promises of Haggai and Zechariah, had to be laid aside. The strength of Persia was indisputable. The province of Judah was an insignificant portion even of the satrapy to which it officially belonged, quite possibly one of the least desirable sections. Not unnaturally a feeling of despondency resulted, encouraging a disbelief in their own significance as a people, a doubt regarding God's power or desire to accomplish the prophetic promises, and a denial of the necessity of drawing lines of demarkation between themselves and other peoples. The ideals of Ezekiel and the hopes of Haggai seemed alike unpractical and unrealizable.

Religiously the condition of the community was no less critical. At no time did the temple cease to be the center of all religious life; the forms of devotion were scrupulously maintained; the hierarchy received increasing recognition as the most important element in the state; yet religion was fast losing its reality for men and its hold upon them. According to the prophet this was largely due to the perfunctory way in which the ritual service was performed by priests whose thoughts were not upon their exalted functions, nor upon the uplift and stimulus which they might impart to the worshiper, but upon their selfish interests. Their manifest cynicism emboldened many of the people to look upon ritual duties as a wearisome burden, to fulfil them in the most convenient manner, and even to offer to Jehovah their worst instead of their best possessions.

Under such circumstances, what wonder that skepticism gained ground, accompanied by an attitude of cynical sufferance

toward the cherished institutions and customs of Israel? Nor is it strange that many of the people adopted purely secular expedients for relief from their difficulties. While a formal alliance of the Jewish community with any or all of the surrounding peoples was probably out of the question, not a few of the men, including even priests and the nobility, married into the wealthy and influential families of these regions, even apparently going so far at times as to divorce their former Israelitish wives² in order to attain this end. Some, no doubt, did not realize to what demoralization such an act would ultimately lead, and only considered it as a shrewd move, rather against the traditions of the fathers, but on the whole defensible. That it was an act of unfaithfulness to Jehovah and of disloyalty to their heritage and hope did not impress them, since their religious convictions had become dulled. So complete was the sway of their selfish ambitions that each one in the community seemed to be working for his own interests alone, defrauding and oppressing all who came within his power.³

Even in such a community, however, there were faithful ones, who were in more serious danger. They were poor and persecuted. Despite their loyal service to God, they were hampered on every side.⁴ They seemed to see good fortune attending those who scorned Jehovah and refused to be bound by any law. Lacking leadership and union and strength, these righteous ones were in danger of yielding their convictions and sinking into apathy.

It is to these that the prophet chiefly speaks. His heart overflows with sympathy for the dispirited ones who "fear Jehovah and keep in mind his name."⁵ He reminds them that such earnest and loyal service as theirs cannot be unrequited or overlooked by Jehovah. He brings also a stern message of rebuke for those who are cynical and selfish. He recalls to the minds of both that the day of Jehovah is to come, to some an awful portent, to others a time of recognition and exaltation. Like all the prophets who went before, our unknown messenger

² Mal. 2 : 10-16.

⁴ Mal. 3 : 14.

³ Mal. 2 : 10 ; 3 : 5.

⁵ Mal. 3 : 16.

of Jehovah aims to make a sense of God's constant presence and power a helpful influence for reformation and for inspiration.

His first words are a keynote for his whole message. Jehovah's great love, as made manifest in his dealings with Israel's hereditary foe, is a fact of significance, not only to Israel, but to the whole world.⁶ It is not, however, a solitary fact. He is also Israel's creator,⁷ father, and lord;⁸ a father to whom reverence is due and a lord who should be honored. Such love as his is no mere sentiment. It will not exhaust itself in doing kindly deeds for his people. It will not permit him to accept from them unhallowed and grudging service. It is a love which can manifest itself in swift and unsparing judgment, as outwardly destructive as the smelter's fire which purifies the silver from its dross.⁹ Such a judgment the slovenly and deceitful service rendered day by day by priesthood and people alike was making imperative.¹⁰ Jehovah seemed to some to be delaying it unreasonably, but he will not destroy any who repent. Before the "great and terrible day" comes, a second Elijah, a great preacher of reform, will seek to restore the nation to its ancient standards of social and religious life.

No less invigorating than this broad and earnest teaching concerning God is the prophet's portrayal of the relationship between Jehovah and his people. Does he seem to have abandoned them? They must remember that there must be more than one party to a covenant. The relation is a mutual one. "Return unto me and I will return unto you, saith the Lord of hosts." He will do better by them than they dare to hope, for Jehovah does not give himself by measure. Let them but give a practical test of their renewed desire to serve him by bringing the tithe to the temple and ungrudgingly supporting its services, and see what a blessing he will pour out.

Yet let his people remember that, since he is their father, they form a great brotherhood united by ties that should be indissoluble. In such a community the spirit of selfishness, greed, faithlessness, and injustice has no place;¹¹ the intermarriage

⁶ Mal. 1 : 2-5.

⁸ Mal. 1 : 6.

¹⁰ Mal. 1 : 6-14.

⁷ Mal. 2 : 10.

⁹ Mal. 3 : 1-3.

¹¹ Mal. 3 : 5.

of its members with those who cannot enter into sympathy with its highest and holiest aspirations is a constant menace to its future¹² and a symptom of disloyalty to its God, while the divorcing of true Israelitish women in favor of strangers is an abomination deserving of swift retribution.

The prophet's last and richest message is for the faithful but desponding Jehovah fearers. He, whose real greatness and goodness is recognized far and wide by pagan nations, among whom is no little reverence and godliness,¹³ must not be misunderstood by those who are, after all, his chosen few, his "special property,"¹⁴ his servants through whom his great world-plan is to be steadily carried forward. Not for a moment has he forsaken them. In his "book of remembrance"¹⁵ is recorded all their faithful, self-denying service. Their part is to remain loyal and unwavering, and to wait with patience the consummation of Jehovah's plan.

The message of Malachi was a tract for his times, but it is equally inspiring for the humble Christian of today, whose outlook on life is circumscribed and despondent, over whom others win advantage, who is led to question the value of honor, devotion and probity. Let him fix his gaze, not upon himself nor upon the world around, but upon the all-wise, ever-loving, just, and gracious Father.

¹² Mal. 2 : 11.

¹³ Mal. 1 : 11, 14.

¹⁴ Mal. 3 : 17.

¹⁵ Mal. 3 : 16.